

Report from the Peace Section Task Force
on Women in Church and Society

NOTE TO READERS: At the spring meeting of the Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section, a group of women presented their concerns regarding the role of women in church and society. It was proposed that Peace Section include women's interests in justice and peace as part of its continuing agenda to examine attitudes, actions, and institutional structures which deny individuals their human rights, depress human potential, and spawn a domination mentality. Rosemary Ruether in the article "Women's Liberation in Historical and Theological Perspective" states:

It has been said that the domination of women is the most fundamental form of domination in society, and all other forms of domination whether of race, class, or ethnic group draw upon the fantasies of sexual domination. This also suggests that the liberation of women is the most profound of all liberation movements, the most far-reaching revolution, because it gets to the roots of the impulse of domination.

A subcommittee was appointed to explore various ways of bringing women's concerns before the attention of the Church. Periodically you will be receiving reports from the Task Force. These reports are not intended to negate the contributions of women in church and society, alienate women from men, or replace male power structures with female power structures. Instead, the Task Force hopes the mailings will (1) provide a forum for sharing concerns, ideas, and resource materials (articles, bibliographies, media suggestions, book reviews, etc.); (2) make visible and affirm efforts being made by women to create a more whole, inclusive church and society; and (3) alert readers to available leadership positions.

This first report is of a more general nature, sketching the role of women in the Church and highlighting some of the more recent developments. In later reports, we will plan to look more specifically at the Mennonite Church. Please let us know what is happening in your area. Is the role of women in your church changing? We'd like to hear about it. Maybe you've just finished reading a book on women's concerns. Why not write a short review and send it to us? You've heard that there is going to be an opening on a conference board? Let us know so we can announce it in our next report. Perhaps you're looking for material on the way women in the Third World view women's liberation. Write us and we'll try to supply you with the information. Correspondence should be addressed to: Task Force on Women, MCC Peace Section, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, PA 17501. By uniting together and sharing information, we can better coordinate efforts to bring about the emergence of a new consciousness in our churches.

A SHORT HERSTORY

The Church's view of woman, shaped by readings of Genesis and St. Paul, has usually failed to distinguish between the essence of faith and sociological factors influencing male editors and translators. In Biblical times, a Hebrew man offered a daily prayer of thanks for not being born a woman. Rabbis refused to teach women Old Testament Law, believing it better to burn the law than teach it to a woman. One rabbi taught, "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law, it is as though he taught her lechery." Church leaders, such as Martin Luther, have held that "Women

are on earth to bear children. If they die in child-bearing, it matters not, that is all they are here to do." Menno Simons' thinking about women reflects the distorted biological knowledge that prevailed for centuries after Christ's birth. The male alone was viewed as being responsible for the whole development of the child in the womb; woman provided only shelter for the child.

Whether placed on a footstool or pedestal, women have been conditioned to underuse their intellectual abilities and leadership skills, to be emotional and passive, and to live out their lives primarily through their husbands and children. Men, too, have suffered from limited sex roles that have programmed them to be competitive and assertive. These paralyzing stereotypes have stood in the way of more dynamic and humanizing relationships.

Throughout history, some women have refused to accept the stereotypes - and have felt the brunt of their decision. Elizabeth Hooton, a Quaker, was beaten at age 60 on her second missionary journey to America. Amanda Smith, the daughter of Maryland slaves, preached the gospel around the world. When she arrived in Washington, D.C., for a religious conference, Ms. Smith had to walk the streets for two days before finding a restaurant that would serve her. Many women who spoke out in church and public for abolition were bitterly denounced in sermons and pamphlets as heretics for having disobeyed Paul's injunction to keep silent in church. A New York minister was tried in his Presbytery in 1877 for permitting two women to speak in church.

In 1853 the first woman was ordained as a clergyman in the United States. Nevertheless, she was not permitted to participate in the seminary's commencement exercises, and her name was deleted from the list of graduates. During the next sixty years, over 3,000 women were ordained to the ministry.

After marching, petitioning Congress, staging vigils in front of the White House, and facing arrest for "disturbing the peace," women won the right to vote in 1920. After passage of the 19th amendment, the women's rights movement remained dormant for the next forty years. Then, in the early 1960's, women involved in the civil rights campaign began to discuss the discrimination they experienced as women while working for the organizations that were striving for the rights of others. Publication of Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique was also responsible for bringing forth a new consciousness among women.

The Church continues to feel the reverberations of this awakening. Some women have chosen to disassociate themselves from churches which ask them to serve coffee but not communion, assume a paternalistic attitude towards women, and discourage the full expression of the liberating power of Christ's Spirit in their lives. Other women, who have chosen to stay in the Church, are feeling alienated and frustrated.

Women are calling for community, an ethic of wholeness, and the liberation of all people. Feminist theologians have brought a new vitality to Scriptural studies by looking at Jesus' attitude towards women. Dr. Conrad Bergendorff writes: "By the regard he shows to women, by the treatment he gives them in word and act, by the purity and universality of his love and ministry, Jesus Christ erased all lines of superiority or inferiority between men and women and placed all on the same level of grace."

"What is needed," according to Dr. Mary Daly in The Church and the Second Sex, "is a more prophetic vision of the Church as a movement in the world, concerned primarily with betterment of the human condition, and seeking to cooperate with all who are striving for this goal. As this attitude develops, with its emphasis upon the work to be done rather than upon vested interests and personal and institutional prestige, women will come more into their own among the people of God."

Discrimination on the basis of sex can no longer be evaded, either morally or legally. The Church can choose to ignore the issue or provide responsible leadership and a more faithful response to the gospel.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Mennonite Happenings: The Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries prepared a seven page study/discussion guide, "The Role of Women in the Church," for use in (Old) Mennonite churches as preparation for Assembly '73, held earlier this month in Harrisonburg. Dorothy Nyce, in her response to MBCM's statement, asks the question, "Does discussion of the role of woman have acceptable validity if done predominantly by men?" The MBCM document and Dorothy Nyce's response are available from the Task Force on Women, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, PA 17501. (P.S. Assembly '73 Delegates-255 men, 22 women.)

The General Conference Mennonite Church is planning a Consultation on the Role of Women in the Church Today. The Consultation, to be held in the Elkhart area from Oct. 25-27, will be limited to approximately 50 and will be by invitation only. We'll be looking forward to your reports on the Harrisonburg and Elkhart meetings!

A survey course, "Women in Church and Society," will be offered at the Associate Mennonite Biblical Seminaries this fall. The course will be approached from Biblical, historical, and sociological perspectives. Keep us posted on the development of this course

MCC Peace Section is planning to center its Midwestern Assembly around the theme of partnership/human liberation/women's role in the church. More details will be announced later. Names of suggested resource persons for the Assembly are welcomed.

Consciousness-Raising Groups: Women across the country are becoming part of consciousness-raising groups. The goal of consciousness-raising is to provide a supportive setting where each woman can share and express her feelings about being a woman in honest, searching encounters. Attitudes and assumptions are examined. As a result of this process, thousands of women are realizing that their goals, values, and dreams are frequently the result of the expectation of others, not their own.

Consequently, women are rejecting a male-centered cultural and religious heritage which excludes women or places them in a subservient position. Groups that would like to examine women's liberation in a Biblical perspective might want to use some of the resources listed on page five. It is imperative that consciousness-raising does not turn into "navel gazing" without any outward expression. The following items list ways women are acting on the awareness they have come to through the consciousness-raising process.

Language: Attempts are being made to develop a language that is whole, positive, and inclusive. A growing number of articles are being printed which challenge the definition of God in male terms. Feminist theologians charge that God has been limited by men who have created God in their own image. God is beyond sex. Some churches are re-writing their printed materials (including worship books, hymnals, curricula, magazines, and church documents) so that all language referring to human beings is inclusive. A powerful three-minute film, entitled Included Out, demonstrates the masculine nature of church language. Think back to some of our hymns: "Rise Up O Men of God," "Faith of Our Fathers," etc. This film can be rented for \$7.00 from Mass Media, 2116 N. Charles St., Baltimore, Maryland 21218. Highly recommended.

Gender Stereotyping and Church Curriculum: In examining church curriculum, women have found that there exists definite sex-role stereotypes of behavior, family roles, occupations, and life styles. The Presbyterian and Methodist Churches have drawn up guidelines for the development of materials that balance the patriarchal image of God with images that emphasize God as having qualities which society ascribes to both sexes. New materials are to show how Christ promoted the dignity of women, to include more Biblical and historical stories about women, and to eliminate stereotypes of male/female roles.

Employment and Positions of Women in the Church:

- Seminary. Task forces on women are studying the status of women in the Church. How many women are on seminary faculties? The American Association of Theological Schools lists 60 women in 2,904 posts. With theological schools cutting costs, student bodies, and faculties, a noticeable addition of women personnel is unlikely.
- Ordination. The first Mennonite woman in the U.S. was ordained this year. The Illinois Mennonite Conference of the Old Mennonite Church approved the recommendation by the study committee that Emma Richards be ordained to the ministry. During its April '73 meeting, the Illinois Conference Leadership Commission pointed out that "it should be clearly understood that this action and such approval of ordination is not open to all women. This stipulation is based on the fact that our district conference delegates have not yet come to this understanding and decision."

Even though most church members feel that it is permissible for women to preach in Sunday School (children's classes, of course) and on the mission field, many would not approve of having a woman behind the pulpit. Martin Marty notes in the June 15 issue of Context that the battle is only half won with ordination. He asks whether congregations are ready to subsidize the new styles of ministry to which women are being called. In Adam's Fractured Rib, Margaret Sittler Ermarth writes: "The crux of the matter is in the way the church defines its ministries in the future. It seems likely that to human beings facing extinction through environmental pollution and as a result of their moral, political, economic, and social failures, the vital question will be 'ordination for what?' rather than 'ordination for whom?'"

- Boards and Committees. Task forces are gathering data on the number of women among the professional church staff as well as the number of women carrying volunteer leadership responsibilities. Position and salary are also being analyzed. The United Church of Christ has established a personnel data bank on women seeking employment or volunteer positions within the church. An examination of the number of assignments women are assuming within the church structure becomes more meaningful when done in the context of women's status (and not just position) in the church.

Alternative-Life Styles: In the process of woman-becoming-person, women are seeing the need for new life styles that permit them to develop their potential. For this to happen, they recognize that there may need to be changes in economic and housing patterns and in marriage and family styles and roles. It is no longer possible to think that the terms "the American family" or "the Christian family" refer to one distinct mode of family living.

Along with an understanding of the value of their own personhood as women comes a recognition of the need for the humanization of society. This concern leads women to write their Congresspeople in protest of the bombings in Cambodia, become involved in prison reform efforts in their community, establish day care centers, launch a campaign to set up a drug rehabilitation program, etc. Thus, liberation does not mean freedom

without restraint or self-indulgence at the expense of others. The Exodus, the Crucifixion-Resurrection, and Pentecost are powerful reminders that liberation is a concept central to the Christian faith.

For freedom Christ has set us free;
stand fast therefore, and do not submit again
to a yoke of slavery. (Galations 5:1)

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Judy and John F., eds. The Other Side. July-August 1973. Articles on such topics as "Paul's Bad News for Women," "Mystique and Machismo," and "Jesus and Women." Available from Fred A. Alexander, Box 158, Savannah, Ohio 44874. 75¢.
- Church Women United. The Woman Packet. Helpful articles; good introduction to various issues. CWU, Box 134, Manhattanville Station, N.Y., N.Y. 10027. \$1.50.
- Clemens, Lois Gunden. Woman Liberated. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1971. Mennonite author. Based on the Conrad Grebel Lecture Series.
- Culver, Elsie Thomas. Women in the World of Religion. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1967. Thorough and positive history of the role and contribution of women from early fertility cults through biblical times, the history of the Christian church and of other religions, to the women's rights movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Out of print, see your church or public library.
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- Harkness, Georgia. Women in Church and Society. An overview of history, issues and analysis of women in church and society. Written by a United Methodist minister.
- Hewitt, Emily and Suzanne Hiatt. Women Priests: Yes or No? New York: Seabury Press, 1973. Review of the current struggles for ordination of women in the Episcopal Church, but articulates many of the key issues related to the ordination of women throughout the Christian Church.
- Kepler, Pat and Ann Schaef. Women and the New Creation, published by Concern Magazine, 1972. A six session course on human development. Order from Room 401, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N. Y. 10027. 50¢.
- Russell, Letty. Women's Liberation in a Biblical Perspective. A six-session study guide produced jointly by United Presbyterian Women and the YWCA. Good for consciousness-raising groups. Order from The Service Center, 7820 Reading Road, Cincinnati, Ohio 45237.

Book Review: The Illusion of Eve by Sidney Cornelia Callahan (Sheed & Ward; \$4.50)

A historically recurring focus in church and society probes the inherent value of woman simultaneously with the discrepancy or consistency she realizes in assignments and roles. With intense honesty, Sidney examines modern woman's quest for identity through scriptures and cultural influences. She concludes: "Only as Eve, Mary, and the rest of women regain their primary identity as human beings related to God and the whole human community can a Christian ideal of woman be restored."

Ms. Callahan, mother of five, insists on a balance between variety and uniqueness in discussing woman as person, wife, mother, and worker. Her study is well documented; her insight penetrating.

How influenced are you by the illusion of Eve?

--Dorothy Nyce, Goshen

Members of the Task Force on Women in Church and Society: Lois Keeney, Bluffton, Ohio; Dorothy Nyce, Goshen, IN; Lora Oyer, Chenoa, IL; Ruth Stoltzfus, Harrisonburg, VA; Luann Habegger, Washington, D.C.; Ted Koontz, Akron, PA.

This first report was prepared by Luann Habegger.

We're eager to hear from you. Please send your suggestions for content/resources/ additional names and addresses to: Task Force on Women in Church and Society, MCC Peace Section, 21 South 12th Street, Akron, PA 17501.

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